

Simmons, Larson join fight to save highway funds

By Tom Breen

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Members of Connecticut's congressional delegation say they will fight an attempt to change the formula by which federal highway spending is determined, an attempt that could cost the state \$163 million.

Lawmakers from the South and West have introduced bills that would shift nearly \$800 million in federal highway funding from northeastern states with aging infrastructure to states in the South and West, claiming that such states have not been getting their fair share of highway money.

A group of 17 states, primarily in the South and Midwest, are called "donor states," meaning they receive less from federal highway programs than they pay in gasoline and other highway taxes.

Under legislation introduced by Rep. Tom DeLay, R-Texas, the majority leader in the House of Representatives, each state would be guaranteed to get back 95 percent of what it pays in highway taxes.

Under the current funding formula, which is reauthorized in Congress every six years, Texas gets about 91 percent of highway taxes back in federal highway funding, while Connecticut gets about 149 percent back, according to Federal Highway Administration figures.

If the new formula is adopted, Connecticut would be one of the country's biggest losers, along with New York State, which could lose \$300 million. Massachusetts and Rhode Island could lose about \$37 million and \$41 million respectively. Overall highway funding from taxes is worth about \$33 billion a year.

Connecticut lawmakers, along with colleagues in Northeastern states like New York and Massachusetts, say the proposal — despite its advocates' claims of "equity" — would disproportionately hurt the Northeast, which has an older infrastructure and higher population density.

which is designed to oppose changes to the current funding formula.

Both Rep. John B. Larson, D-1st District, and Rep. Robert Simmons, R-2nd District, have joined the group.

The overall highway appropriations bill, called the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century, is scheduled for a vote in September.

"They're not looking at the big picture," Simmons said Wednesday regarding his colleagues from the South and West who aim to change the formula. "I consider what we have now to be very reasonable."

Simmons said that in terms of overall federal taxes, Connecticut pays more per capita and gets less back in funding than any other state. Texas, he said, was ranked number 22 in per capita federal tax payments.

When considering changes to tax formulas and funding, he said, lawmakers should take the entire amount paid to Washington into account, not just the highway money.

"If we're going to make things more fair, that's fine," he said. "Then we should also make sure the total formula benefits us."

Simmons is in a politically delicate position, since his opposition to the bill involves challenging DeLay, the powerful Republican majority leader.

"Is it politically a bad move? No, because we're right on the issue," Simmons said. "The facts speak for themselves."

Simmons said if lawmakers in the South and the West were concerned about increasing their federal highway funding, they should consider raising the overall appropriation for the bill, something he supports.

Rep. Christopher Shays, R-4th District, also is in favor of raising the overall appropriation, according to Betsy Hawkins, his chief of staff.

"There is a profound need for infrastructure maintenance in the Northeast, where the roads are older," Hawkins said Tuesday.

Larson has met with his fellow lawmakers, the state Department of

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